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## **ELECTIONS**

# **Secret Service appears unlikely to move RNC protest zone despite pressure from Republicans**

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As Republicans put pressure on the U.S. Secret Service to move an expected protest area farther from the Republican National Convention in downtown Milwaukee, the agency appears unlikely to change its plans.

Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, Florida Sen. Rick Scott and aides to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell raised the security concerns in separate meetings Tuesday with Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle, according to multiple sources.

Johnson told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that Cheatle said she does not have the “authority” to alter the current security plans, but Secret Service officials have suggested there is no evidence to justify a change. Republicans have pushed to expand the security perimeter, which will require credentials to enter, to include a nearby park where a protest area is expected to be located.

“I’m not a security expert, but this just looks like an obvious area of concern here that I think needs to be changed,” Johnson told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel after his meeting with Cheatle. “So we’re going to keep working to get it changed.”

The Secret Service in a statement reiterated the factors that determine how security perimeters for events such as the RNC are developed.

“The security perimeter for the 2024 Republican National Convention is based on security considerations, including protective intelligence, risk and threat assessments, and is developed to ensure the highest level of security, while minimizing impacts to the public,” Anthony Guglielmi, chief of communications for the Secret Service, said Tuesday.

The meetings came days after McConnell sent a letter to Cheatle echoing concerns raised earlier by a lawyer for the Republican National Committee about the potential for conflict between demonstrators and convention attendees if a protest area were permitted at Pere Marquette Park a quarter mile from Fiserv Forum, the convention's main event center.

Republicans have argued that convention attendees would have to walk by the demonstrators in the park on their way to the event, creating what the RNC attorney called "a mandated confrontational area."

Johnson on Tuesday told the Journal Sentinel that he "pointed out the obvious risk" of the current plans for protesters to Cheatle during the meeting. He suggested the agency might have concerns over potential lawsuits if the protest site is moved farther away but said he didn't think Tuesday's discussion would be the last on the issue.

Johnson said he did not specify during the meeting where he'd like to see the protesters moved, saying he instead was "advocating for my constituents, the residents of Milwaukee and Wisconsin."

Protest organizers have sought a closer location than Pere Marquette Park.

City officials have said the city must provide a speaker's podium and march route that is within "sight and sound" of the RNC under the U.S. Constitution and the RNC framework agreement to which city leaders signed on in 2022.

Neither has been officially announced, though Mayor Cavalier Johnson's chief of staff Nick DeSiato said in March that Pere Marquette Park would be a "likely candidate" for the speaker's platform.

Pere Marquette was the designated protest area for the 2020 Democratic National Convention, but that event turned largely virtual during the coronavirus pandemic and the park drew limited activity.

A "security footprint" downtown is expected to extend from Cherry Street to the north to West Clybourn Street on the south and from North Water Street on the east to North 9th Street on the west.

Within that footprint will be a fenced-in area around the main convention venues that will not be accessible to anyone but credentialed attendees. The event will take place at Fiserv Forum, the UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena and the Baird Center.

Johnson on Tuesday said he had not met with city leaders about the perimeter — “I’m not in charge of this. I don’t want to step on anybody’s toes,” he said — but noted he’s met with Milwaukee Police Chief Jeffrey Norman about preparations and highlighted the additional \$25 million in security funding to both the RNC and the Democratic National Convention that Congress approved in March.

Still, he suggested further discussions on the perimeter could happen in the near future.

“This was just what I thought I needed to do to get briefed but also let the Secret Service understand my position and my concern on this thing,” he said.

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